



Joan Talks About the Big 5

Background Knowledge

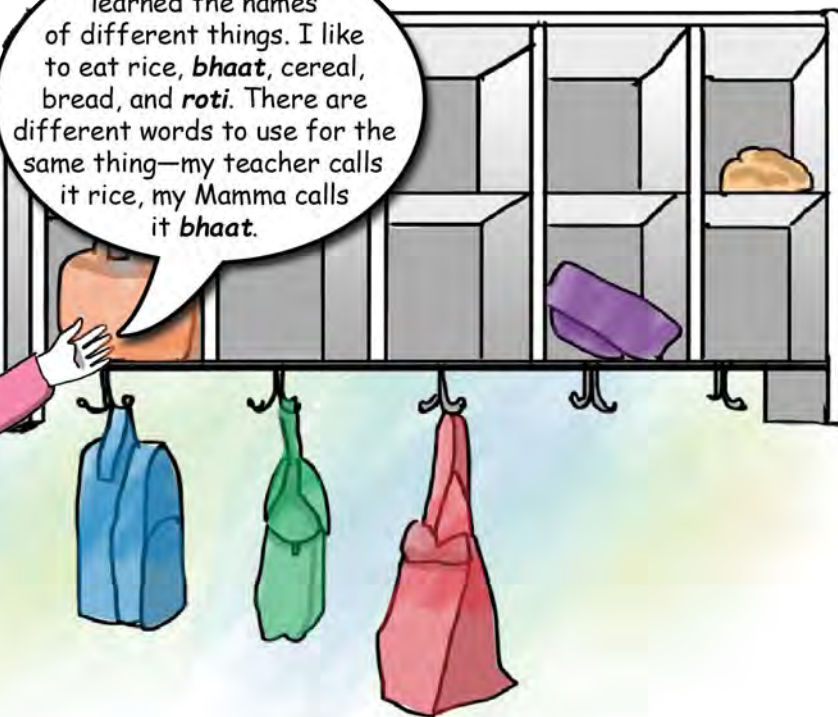
Background knowledge is all of the information that children learn and store in their memories. This includes information about themselves, other people, objects, and the world around them. These concepts and key terms are introduced in the home language.

Background knowledge can be developed in one or more languages. It can also transfer from one language to another. Joan illustrates this as she talks about rice.



Hi, I'm Joan! I love eating rice. My friends eat rice with a spoon while I sometimes eat rice with my fingers, but it tastes the same!

I have learned the names of different things. I like to eat rice, *bhaat*, cereal, bread, and *roti*. There are different words to use for the same thing—my teacher calls it rice, my Mamma calls it *bhaat*.



Background Knowledge meets Book Knowledge and Print Concepts

In exploring and reading books, both fiction and nonfiction, children learn about the world in which they live. They gain the understanding that some books provide information rather than tell a story and, with the help of adults, find answers to their questions. When parents read books in their home language, it gives children the opportunity to learn about their language, print, and culture.



As a toddler, I enjoyed looking at the pictures in books, like *Rice* and *The Life of Rice*, as my teacher talked about each picture.

In preschool, I remembered the books and would ask my mother questions about how rice is grown. She borrowed the book *The Life of Rice* from the library and read it to me. Then I had a lot more questions!



Background Knowledge meets Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing

In the early years, writing involves using pictures to convey messages, making marks on paper to give meaning to drawings, or writing a few letters of the alphabet. Writing is the bridge between the worlds of oral language and literacy—the written world.

Background knowledge gives children the material they will use in developing their pictures, messages, and basic written communication (Schickedanz & Casbergue, 2004).

Knowledge of the alphabet is a critical skill in the development of writing in English. In other languages it may be the syllabic alphabet (e.g., Bengali, Hindi), or logography (e.g., Chinese). Bilingual children often learn to read and write in both languages at the same time—at preschool, at home, or in both contexts (Schickedanz & Collins, 2013).



My teacher showed us how to puff rice to make it rice cereal. It reminded me of making popcorn. She wrote down each step of puffing the rice on chart paper and put it on the wall. She sent a copy of the recipe home.

This year, in kindergarten, my friends and I made our own book on grains. We glued different types of grains onto the paper, drew pictures, and wrote stories. We used our imaginations! My mom translated the stories we wrote into Bengali. I enjoyed sharing our stories in both English and Bengali.



Background Knowledge meets Oral Language and Vocabulary

Dual language learners may learn some words first in one language, and other words first in another language. Once they have learned a word in one language, they only need to learn the label in the other language since they already know the meaning! Background knowledge helps all children develop vocabulary and assists in the acquisition of oral language skills. It provides them with context, content, and conversation-making skills.



As we read a book called *The Runaway Rice Cake*, I shared *idli* with my teacher and friends. *Idli* is a type of rice cake that I eat at home with my family. Our teacher downloaded photos of both types of rice cakes, and we talked about the words for *rice cake* in Chinese and Tamil.

Grandma came to our class to share her stories about visiting an area in India where they grow rice. My friends and I learned new words like *terrace farming*, *husk*, and *spikelets*.





Professional References

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Children's Book References

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- Sobol, R. (2010). *The life of rice: From seedling to supper*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.
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